

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL SIMEON TROMBITAS, DIRECTOR OF THE IRAQI COUNTER-TERRORISM FORCE TRANSITION TEAM, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 10:00 A.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, JULY 24, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): And as we get started, it looks like we've got a full house today. On the line with us today is Grim from Blackfive, Christian Lowe with military.com. We've got Scott with Flopping Aces, DJ Elliot with the Long War Journal, Chuck Simmins with America's Northshore Journal, and Farook Ahmed and Bruce McQuain, QandOnet. So --

Q Jarred Fishman.

MR. HOLT: Oh, Jarred, you're here, too. Okay, thank you very much. I'm glad you could join us. We're got Jared Fishman with us as well. As we'll -- as we get things started here, we'll have opening remarks from Brigadier General Trombitas and then we'll get on with our questions and answers. General Trombitas, I thank you for joining us today. General Trombitas is the commanding general of the Iraq National Counter-Terror Force transition team, part of the multinational security transition command in Iraq. General Trombitas, thank you very much for joining us and the floor is yours, sir.

GEN. TROMBITAS: Why, thank you. First of all, I guess it's morning over there so, good morning to you all. Thanks for listening to me. I'm just here to make a very short statement on what we do and what the Iraq National Counterterrorist Force does. And their primary mission is to synchronize and focus all elements on Iraqi national power to defeat terrorism here in Iraq.

It's a three-tiered structure and at the top is a counterterrorism bureau. And that's a ministry-level organization and it's responsible for strategy, policy, and priority. It has bureau oversight of all of the other activities and it's a primary advisor to the prime minister and all CT activities. The second part of that tier is the counterterrorism command. And they basically conduct operational command-and-control functions. They direct our CT operations and also they leverage the intelligence communications, aviation, and other enablers to support our operations.

Another key part of what they do is conduct a terror-network mapping so we can come up with a good CT campaign plan and pass it down to those user units. The ISOF brigade is the tactical element of the command and they can act swiftly to conduct CT operations nationwide. I think they're rather unique in that they've been working with our special forces since they were established in

2003. And they've proven to be a capable combat-proven force, again, with a five-year relationship with us. And that's unique.

We are expanding our capabilities on a regional basis. I think it's open knowledge that we're going to move to four other locations throughout the country to expand our reach both in terms of strike capabilities and intelligence gathering. We're looking at doing things like building our soft aviation capability through the use of rotary wing assets. We're going to use these basically, again, to help us further execute our operations. This capability will allow us to plan, execute, synchronize air assault operations on multiple objectives with our CT forces and then also give us the ability to infiltrate, ex-filtrate, have casualty evacuation, quick reaction capability that is Iraqi.

And I think that will definitely enhance our mission. And, with that, that's a quick snapshot of what we do and kind of where we're going. I know there's a lot of knowledgeable people out there so I'll open myself to questions.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much, sir. Grim, you were first online so why don't you get us started.

Q Yes, thank you. General, I see from your bio that you were involved with a similar mission in El Salvador during the latter part of war that ended with the Chapultepec Peace Accords in '91. And also you've been in Colombia.

I'd like to ask you how much these kinds of training missions are transferable from one region or culture to another, how much you can take with you and how much you have to learn new every time.

GEN. TROMBITAS: Yeah, I think they're very transferable and I think the basics are extremely transferable. As special forces soldiers, wherever we go, we try to immerse ourselves in the culture, learn the language. I'll tell you one thing I'm missing here is the language piece, but we take the time to study the culture and try to work within the bounds of that as we get our mission accomplished.

I'm extremely pleased in both of those places you mentioned. I think that here recently a long-standing relationship with the United States special forces contributed greatly to the rescue mission in Colombia. I will tell you that right now there is a battalion of Salvadorans in combat here in Iraq, in the southern part of the country, and they're here due to our long presence in working with them, too. And I foresee that in the future of Iraq, that if we develop and they become a stable regional power, that we maintain a good relationship with their special operations force and achieve the same endgame with them. Does that answer your question?

Q It does. I have a very quick follow-up. What kinds of tools might be more helpful? We've heard, for example, some outreach to the academic community. Would you find civilian advisors from the academic community helpful? And, if so, what disciplines in particular do you think might be useful?

GEN. TROMBITAS: For our particular organization, being structured the way it is, at the CTB, at the bureau and ministry level, I believe that any additional outreach to academic institutions would be extremely useful in

strategic planning and strategic leadership. We have, as you guys are well aware, some very fine schools in the United States that teach this and are available to our military officers to attend. Those same things are useful and necessary here.

Q Thank you, general.

MR. HOLT: All right. Christian?

Q Thanks, General, for joining us and talking with us about this fascinating and important group of Iraqi soldiers. And I wish, if you would, expand a little more on your opening comment. Could you be -- could you sort of burrow down into greater detail for us how many Iraqi soldiers are involved in this counterterrorism force? Where do they come from? Can you describe some of the missions that they've been on like with specific names of people that they might have captured or something like that so we can do a better job of telling their story? GEN. TROMBITAS: You know, without going into classified areas, and I don't like to talk numbers, right now it's a brigade-sized element.

I think if you look at open sources it talks about the number of battalions we have. And there are right now four operational battalions, a training battalion, and a support battalion. And, again, I think the numbers are available open-source.

Those types of missions they do are counterterrorist missions. Those things that traditionally our special forces have done, I think that the direct-action missions kind of sums up what we do: go through a pretty intensive intelligence-rich process of identifying bad guys, so to speak, and then doing our best to kill or capture them regionally to negate the effect of terrorism in a region in the city and specifically here, most recently in operations in Mosul, in Basra, in Amarah, we've been very effective in doing that against both al Qaeda and JAM.

Q And you mentioned four other provinces that you guys were going to be expanding into. Can you name those provinces for me?

GEN. TROMBITAS: Right now there is an element in Mosul. There's an element in Basra. We'll extend to Al Asad and also to Diyala.

Q And that includes -- and then the fifth would be Baghdad?

GEN. TROMBITAS: Yes, our headquarters is here and this is an integral part of what we do.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Scott.

Q I e-mailed some questions earlier. Did you get those, Jack?

MR. HOLT: Yes, I did.

Q Would you mind?

MR. HOLT: All right. Well, let's see -- the first one I've got here from you is, "Is there a portion of the counterterrorism forces in Iraq that are

dedicated to countering enemy propaganda and terrorist Internet activity?" GEN. TROMBITAS: You know, that -- in the organization I advise, no.

MR. HOLT: Okay, all right. Are there any plans for that?

GEN. TROMBITAS: Currently no. We have our hands full with what we do, quite frankly.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Okay, and we've got a few more -- I've got your other questions; we'll get back to that. Right now let's go to DJ. DJ Elliott, The Long War Journal.

Q Yes, sir. I was wondering, with the Iraqi national police's absorbing the emergency response brigades and units, which includes all the SWAT, I was wondering if they were looking at folding the SWAT component into the counterterrorism bureau.

GEN. TROMBITAS: At this point in time, we're not. In some of the operations we've run recently, specifically in Basra, they were OPCOM to our headquarters to conduct specific operations. But right now, they are not considered any time in the near future to be incorporated into the special operations brigade, or into the CTC, the command itself.

MR. HOLT: Okay, and Chuck Simmins.

Q General, thank you for talking with us. How involved was your command with the Iraqi move into Basra? We're getting a lot of statements in the media over here that the United States was completely ignorant about the move. I'm finding that hard to believe given our embedding teams with so many units and things like that. How involved was your command with the move into Basra?

MR. HOLT: If you guys could get the gist of that?

GEN. TROMBITAS: I'm sorry, could you repeat that? You were coming in broken. I caught pieces of about --

Q Okay, how is --

GEN. TROMBITAS: Basra and embedding, but you were very broken.

Q Okay, how involved was your command with the Iraqi move into Basra, and how -- can you speak to how much knowledge that we may have had about that move prior to it occurring?

GEN. TROMBITAS: Wow. I'm sorry, again. You were broken. I heard how much you were in Basra and then something about how much knowledge you had about something. Maybe if one of the other stations can hear you more clearly and translate to us, I'll be able to answer.

MR. HOLT: Okay, yes, sir. This is Jack. His question is how involved was your unit with the Iraqi move into Basra and what prior -- what was the extent of your prior knowledge of the Iraqi plans of the events in Basra?

GEN. TROMBITAS: I'll tell you quite frankly, I was not here during that time period. I just got here about two -- a little over two months ago. I don't know what prior knowledge we had. I know we're -- the unit ISAF itself

was an integral part of the operation, and I thought it was a pretty good joint operation between the Army. And as I said before, the police were involved in our unit with conventional forces during a lot of clearing operations, our guys hitting targets. I know that our advisors moved forward into Basra with the elements that we're working with.

As to prior knowledge, I'm sorry, I wasn't here then, and I can't tell you. We've had a rather large rotation here in the last couple of months, and that's one question I just can't answer.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. Let's see. Farook.

Q Hi, sir. Thanks for joining us on the call. I'd like to know, what is exactly the relationship right now with the U.S. SAF and ISAF? Is it a partnership still? Is it more of an over-watch? Is there transition or plans for transition. And how reliant are -- is the ISAF on U.S. advisors?

GEN. TROMBITAS: I don't know if reliance is a good word. There is a tradition -- yeah, there is a relationship. As I've said, since the unit was formed as 36 commander in 2003, we've had U.S. Special Forces with them. We still train with them, we conduct missions with them. I will tell you, they're at a level right now where they are capable of conducting unilateral missions and have done that. We still maintain a relationship with them. You know, it's still -- and we are still working on some of the fine points as, as throughout the military here, of not only special operations, but since we're forming a brigade and a command, working with things like communications logistics, you know, the traditional enablers to conduct operations, just the admin stuff, creating an NCO corps, training and selection of individuals. We're doing that, partnering with the Iraqis on the operational side. We run bilateral operations with them. And as I said, they're capable of conducting unilateral operations at this time.

Q Okay, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Bruce.

Q Hey, General. Bruce McQuain. I wonder if you wouldn't mind going as much as possible as you can into more detail on the terror network mapping portion that you talked about.

GEN. TROMBITAS: Yeah, I'd say it's a process by which we identify -- we campaign plan using that as a tool. We identify those that are nodes that we believe are crucial to the terrorist network and those things that we need to target to negate that. I'm sorry; that's about all of the detail I can go into at this point in time.

Q That's what I figured, but I thought I'd ask.

GEN. TROMBITAS: Good try. (Laughter.)

MR. HOLT: All right, Jarred.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for all of your efforts.

Could you talk a little bit about the plans, excuse me, to expand from one brigade possibly to another brigade, or to start pushing the expertly trained Special Forces guys into the other different parts of the unit to update

the expertise in the regular Iraqi army, similar to what we would do in the States, training different people in different occupations, try to get that knowledge base and leadership base distributed throughout the Army.

GEN. TROMBITAS: You know, at this point in time, I'll tell you because of the structure is a separate bureau that -- there's a CPD law in the works that will establish it; there's a separate bureau quite possibly in the future, move it to be a separate ministry. And as such, there are no plans to take the special forces operators from our unit and put them in the rest of the army. We focus on our own element. There's no plans, right now, to expand any larger than the size I stated, although we may break down into two headquarters elements because of the size a battalion will ultimately have. And you know, be it conventional or unconventional, you know, traditionally a brigade headquarters takes about three to six battalions. And we may split a headquarters and have two headquarter brigades, but the same number of units underneath. It just facilitates the ease of our command and control.

I will say that, you know, the conventional army has just a great program where they are training the other Iraqi units. I know there's a lot of experience there as well, that they're spreading out throughout the regular Iraqi army to do some of the things that you mentioned.

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right, anybody we miss?

Q Jack, I have a follow-up.

MR. HOLT: Okay, go ahead.

Q Thanks, General. This is Christian Lowe again, with Military.com. A couple specifics here: Who exactly are the counterterrorism forces going out? What terrorist networks? And then also, what would you say is the percentage of unilateral operations compared to operation plans, and then assistance given to the Iraqi cause? GEN. TROMBITAS: Okay, the last part was kind of broken up. But I mean, we go after -- you know, those enemies were targeted across the board. The AQI are tops on our list and here in recent operations they've targeted JAM. And those are both threats, you know, to the security of Iraq as we speak right now.

I'm sorry, what was the second part of your question?

Q Thank you. The second part of the question was what would you -- how could you gauge the percentage of operations that are, A, conducted unilaterally by the Iraqi special operations forces and then, by comparison, B, operations that are collaborative, let's say, or that are prompted by U.S. desires and intelligence and operational needs and then executed in partnership with the Iraqis?

GEN. TROMBITAS: I'll tell you quite frankly, I've never looked at percentages. You know, we're still, I would say, running the majority of missions bilaterally but very unilateral capabilities increasing with every major operation we run. And they're comfortable, at this point in time, doing unilateral operations, even without some of our enablers. That having been said, you know, we continue to work together. I mean, our SF guys, that's their mission and -- I don't want to say we enjoy running it, you know -- that's our mission. We're training with the guys. When, for example -- whatever opportunity we have to allow them to conduct unilateral missions, we do that.

In terms of targeting, targets come down from both sides, quite frankly. There are some Iraqi targets that are generated from their side of the house through the bureau and through other agencies, and there are some that are generated by our side of the house. Those have been analyzed and it's determined which force can best handle that target.

Q Okay, thanks a lot.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Scott's got another question here: Sir, what would you like the world to know about the people doing counterterrorism operations and facilitating the transition to the Iraqis?

GEN. TROMBITAS: Well, I'd like them to know that, you know, first off and always, our special operating forces are the best in the world. And I think they've exemplified that, both here and in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Philippines, Colombia, wherever they might be. And you know, we just have a lot of great people out here making things happen.

I think that the Iraqi capability is phenomenal. Yesterday, we had the opportunity to put on a demonstration to General Helmick, our new commander, and the new sergeant major here at MNSTC-I, and they were extremely impressed, I'll tell you. If you were to see the Iraqi special forces soldiers standing next to one of ours, in terms of equipment and capabilities, it would be hard to distinguish, you know, them just standing there. I think that they are trained to a high level. Our special forces have a high level of confidence in them. They never hesitate to run missions with each other, and I think that speaks highly of their capability and our guys' trust in them.

I think that in future operations we'll only get better. I think that they're well on the road to conducting the majority of their operations unilaterally. I think, like all good special forces units, we still need to do some work in administration and in logistics and that piece of the pie, but I'm just awful proud of our effort and theirs, in conducting counterterrorism operations.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much. Anybody else? Anyone for follow-ups?

Q I've got a follow-up. Sir, could you talk a little bit to the types of training? You said they're pretty much a stand-alone unit now, separate from the Army, the types of schools that are being put up or where they get most of their training.

GEN. TROMBITAS: Their training is much like our special forces. I mean, we start out with a relatively, you know, higher number of people than we accept. There's a selection process which is physical, mental, mechanical, in terms of skills, and then we hone that down and we do those things that our special operators know how to do. They train in, you know, specific training; I mean, we have snipers, we have guys that are -- the majority of them are good in close-quarters battle. Those things that we expect of our rangers and special forces are the type of things we train in, small-unit leadership, an awful lot of shooting so we could be very discriminating when we hit targets. And that, again, is part of the close-quarter battle piece.

Those things that we do ancillary to our operations -- medical capabilities, communicators, crude sort of weapons training, all of those things that make us good, and repetition in that. You know, to be a good shot you have

to shoot every day, go to the range numerous times to hit pinpoint targets; you have to, you know, practice hitting pinpoint targets. And that's what our guys do and, you know, they work very closely, again, with our special forces and do the same kind of drills we do and make them good at their skill like we are.

MR. HOLT: All right. Okay, sir, we're about out of time here. Do you have any last words for us, closing comments for us, sir?

GEN. TROMBITAS: No, just appreciate talking to all of you guys. Thank you for your interest and concern in what we do. I'd just like to, you know, echo once again that, you know, not only are we doing the right thing here and our guys are working very hard but, you know, as I mentioned earlier, folks like the El Salvadorans, the Australians, the British, that we've had habitual relationships, the Koreans in the north who have special forces elements here as well, doing some CA and SIOPs up there, all testimony to our long relationship with folks from these nations, and just an example of what that special operations melding does for us in global operations. I couldn't be prouder of our men and women in the United States armed forces for what they do here and globally, and I thank you all for giving me the opportunity to tell you that.

MR. HOLT: All right, well thank you very much. Brigadier General Simeon Trombitas is the commanding --

GEN. TROMBITAS: Trombitas.

MR. HOLT: Trombitas. Sorry about that, sir.

GEN. TROMBITAS: It's quite all right. I've been called worse.

MR. HOLT: -- (laughs) -- is the commanding general for the Iraqi national counterterrorist force transition team, part of the multinational security transition command in Iraq. Thank you very much for joining us, sir. Hopefully we can speak again.

GEN. TROMBITAS: I look forward to it, and you guys have a good day.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you very much.

END.